

Levi's Go Forth Campaign:  
A Semiotic Analysis of "America"

A Senior Project

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by  
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### **Introduction: Levi's 'Go Forth' Campaign**

On August 31, 2005, Louisiana's biggest city, New Orleans, was destroyed. Hurricane Katrina, rated as a Category 4 hurricane, flooded 80% of the city (Verderber 257). A lively city once comprised of authentic cuisine, music and Mardi Gras, was known to be the "most unique" city in America. New Orleans was a destination spot for tourists around the country, and a place to call home for approximately 455,000 people. Once Hurricane Katrina hit, an immediate sense of disaster and loss had overcome the entire country. According to the Hurricane Katrina Relief website, over 204,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, and over 1,500 residents were killed. Hurricane Katrina was one of the deadliest hurricanes to ever hit the United States. After the hurricane hit, our nation had lost hope, courage and optimism. The city was submerged, severely damaged, and had an estimated cost of 110 billion dollars of damages.

Throughout the years, millions of people around the world prayed, donated supplies and money, traveled to New Orleans to volunteer and ultimately tried to put the pieces back together. Throughout this disaster, New Orleans has still maintained their lively spirit. Not only did the country provide support and aid, the residents of New Orleans, who had lost everything, helped their neighbors, friends and even strangers to search, rebuild and develop a greater sense of community. Our country moved forward, despite the horrific consequences, and became a stronger and more unified country than ever before.

Levi's Jeans Company wanted to portray how incredible it was for the country to move forward after Hurricane Katrina. This is exactly what the Levi's 'Go Forth' campaign accomplished; the "brand of pioneers who are in the process of building a new

America". Through this commercial, Levi's got the rare opportunity to show America's past and future, and the hardworking people of the country. The hopeful future is portrayed through the campaign's spokesperson, Walt Whitman. The simple but powerful and emotive poem, *America*, is played. Not only was Levi's one of the few American brand companies around when Whitman was alive, but the brand also wants to portray the pioneering mindset that Whitman had symbolized, to return to the roots of America. Through the use of semiotics, viewers can not only capture this amazing and artistic advertisement, but also are capable of understanding the true and hidden meanings behind the campaign. The Levi's 'Go Forth' brand campaign argues that Levi's jeans are the jeans for the hard-working, independent, and optimistic people of this country. With this campaign, consumers can not only pay respect to the revolutionary days of the past, but also reinvent the idea of the pioneering spirit for the world we live in today.

### **History of Semiotics**

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and the way in which they construct meaning. Semiotic analysis was said to have started by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. The two men's views of semiotics differed slightly but both agreed on the fact that signs were the primary focus and the sole reason for understanding communication.

Charles Peirce, who lived from 1839 to 1914, was an American philosopher and a founder of pragmatism. Peirce defines pragmatism as "determining the meaning of concepts, particularly of philosophic concepts by consideration of the experimental differences in the conduct of life which would conceivably result from the affirmation or

denial of the meaning in question” (Houser 112). Peirce wrote on topics of an immense range, including mathematics, sciences, economics, and psychology. Peirce also founded a general theory of signs. He preferred the term “semiotic” rather than Saussure’s term of “semiology”, which will be discussed later. In Peirce’s theory, the sign relation is a triadic relation: the representamen, which is the form that the sign takes; an interpretant, which is the sense made of the sign; and an object, to which the sign refers. “A sign... [in the form of a *representamen*] is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen” (Peirce).

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**Figure 1. Charles Peirce. The Semiotic Triangle**

In Figure 1, the sign vehicle represents the form of a sign, also known as representamen. Sense represents the sense made of sign also known as the interpretant and referent represents what the sign stands for, otherwise known as the object. He focused on three aspects of signs: the iconic, indexical, and symbolic. Icons represented resemblance, pictures and statues, such as the Statue of Liberty. Symbols represented things such as flags, and that one must learn what the meaning was. Indexes implied causal relationships, an example being that fire causes smoke. A difference between other philosophers and Peirce's view on semiotics was that he believed that interpreters need to determine part of the meanings of signs. He wrote that a sign "is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (Berger 5). Simply said, whatever we do in life, it can be seen as a sign and that everyone has a different interpretation of those signs and their meanings.

Ferdinand de Saussure was a Swiss linguist who lived from 1857 to 1913 and was coined the term "father" of linguistics. His famous book, Course on General Linguistics, written in 1915, was a model for structuralist thought and suggested the consideration of semiotic analysis. Semiotic analysis was created to study language and different forms of communication. In contrast to Peirce's three aspects of signs, it is important to realize that Saussure believed that there was no connection between a sign and its meaning but a connection between a concept and sound-image. This belief sets Saussure apart from previous philosophers. This combination of concept and sound-image is called a sign. The sound-image represents the signifier, and the concept represents the signified. "The sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified" (Saussure).

The primary purpose of semiotics is to understand meaning. “A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable...I shall call it semiology. Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them” (Saussure). The element in understanding meaning has to do with structure of relationship between different items; there are only differences. Concepts and ideas would mean nothing without the negative relations or opposites.

Saussure’s first level sign system is tri-dimensional containing signs, the signified, and the signifier. The relationship is unmotivated and not natural. A sign must have both a signifier and a signified. The signifier is the element that makes the statement or delivers the message, such as words, images, gestures, or sounds. The signified is the content or idea displayed. This sign system is part of the linguistic system.

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**Figure 2. Ferdinand de Saussure. First Level Sign System**

Saussure's second level sign system is part of the mythical system. The second level sign is at the level of connotation. Barthes makes a distinction between denotation and connotation. Denotation can be described as the "sake of convenience", which falls under the first level sign system. However with myths, the idea of a sign in the first level sign system, which is the combination of concept and an image, is changed to a signifier. The signifier is the last term in the linguistic system and the first term in the mythical system. Myth appropriates a first order sign, uses it for its own signifier, which will have its own signified, thus becoming a new sign. The signifier is also now called the form. The signified still is represented as the concept. However, the term for sign is now changed to signification. Figure 3 portrays the second level sign system according to Barthes, and Figure 4 displays the two levels of Saussure's sign system.

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**Figure 3. Roland Barthes. Second Level Sign System**



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**Figure 4. Ferdinand Saussure. The Two Levels of Sign Systems**

In the book *Mythologies* by Roland Barthes, myth is defined as “the way [the object] utters its message”. The example that Barthes uses to illustrate his theory is a front cover from *Paris Match* magazine, figure 5. The magazine cover shows a young black soldier in a French uniform saluting the fold of the tricolor. The second level signifier in the image is the saluting soldier. We can not tell further what is happening in the picture. The signified in the image is the military gesture, French devotion and the ethnic difference. According to the second level of signification, the combination of the signifier and signified creates the new sign. This image is signifying the idea that France’s empire treats all of its subjects equally. Myth analysis unfolds the underlying meaning behind artifacts.

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**Figure 5. Roland Barthes. Magazine Cover.**

The process of carrying meaning in signs depends on codes. According to Saussure, since the relationship between the signified and signifiers are arbitrary, interpreting signs depends on the known codes of communication. Berger defines codes as highly complex patterns of associations that all members of a given society and culture learn. Cultural codes play an important role in people's lives as well. In order to fit in a culture as a member, one must understand the cultural codes of that society. For example, a country such as Malaysia has very different socially acceptable rules that the citizens

must follow and which the government implements on the citizens. Censorship in the media is one of the biggest problems in Malaysia, editing out the word 'girl' from the song 'I kissed a girl' by Katy Perry, and blurring people smoking cigarettes in movies; things that our culture would not even consider as bad being shown in the media. These codes bear certain messages that ultimately will affect the way individuals live and interact.

Semiotics has been extremely active in the aspects of all advertising. With the use of semiotics, there is an embedding of underlying messages that viewers tend to be shocked at. "The goal of semiotics in the study of advertising is, ultimately, to unmask the arrays of hidden meanings in the underlying level" (Beasley 20). In order to correctly analyze advertisements through semiotics, the viewer must sort the relations between signifiers and signified in brand names, logos, and commercials. Barthes stressed the importance of approaching advertising through semiotics because he claimed, "that advertising taps into the mythic level of mind, because its texts are imbedded with mythic themes" (Chisnall). In order to get an understanding of how semiotics is used in advertising, take a look at the figure below. The advertisement features a male model kneeling in the sand. There is an image of the product with the words 'Essence of Freedom'. The notion of freedom is what the advertisement is suggesting. "The notion of freedom is primarily conveyed by the image of this lone man, who, in his lonesome location, seems extremely at ease, and unrestricted by normal life, thus providing a sense of liberation" (Clare).

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**Figure 5. Dior Advertisement**

Advertising is a very powerful and effective way to promote a product, and there are many underlying messages that semiotics will uncover. Semiotic Analysis can be applied to many genres of the media; however, the latter of this paper will focus on the analysis of a television advertisement.

### Levi's Go Forth Campaign

*“America, Centre of equal daughters, equal sons. All, All alike endear’d. Grown, Ungrown. Young or old. Strong, Ample, Fair, Enduring, Capable, Rich, Perennial with the Earth, with Freedom, Law and Love...”* This is an excerpt from Walt Whitman’s 1888 poem entitled, “America”, and is the basis of Levi’s Go Forth campaign. Walt Whitman was an American poet and was claimed by others to be the ‘poet of democracy’ and said to be the definition of America. Whitman was the inspiration and voice for Levi’s ‘Go Forth’ campaign and commercials. Advertisements are the best-known way to sell a product. The advertisers choose how to portray the company and the product. The ‘Go Forth’ brand campaign had a new approach and tone in their advertisements that Levi’s had never produced or experimented with before. Levi’s teamed up with the Wieden + Kennedy agency creating two stirring, some even say controversial, commercials. The first commercial that was aired was entitled *Pioneers! Oh Pioneers!* The message that the advertisers wished to portray was that we are pioneers who have powerful individual rights and are ready to fight. Blogs and articles over the internet claim that the message for individual rights “is skewed as it suggests we are pioneers, but that we are simultaneously entitled to take away the right of others” (Now Public). This commercial got a bad reputation from many viewers concluding that it was *just* a jeans commercial, it should not be more.

The creators of the Go Forth campaign did not give up. The second commercial aired on July 4<sup>th</sup>, Independence Day. This was not a coincidence for the airing date to be on the day the Declaration of Independence was signed. The *America* Go Forth commercial shows optimism, hope and patriotism during hard economic and social times

in the United States. I will be showing how semiotics can be applied in the media and advertising, as well as to the *America Go Forth* commercial.

### **America**

The first thing viewers see when the “America ‘Go Forth’” commercial begins is a neon, flickering banner sign that says ‘America’ and is submerged underwater. A man starts to recite a poem and what is fascinating and unique about this recording is that it is believed to be a wax cylinder recording of Walt Whitman himself, reading from his poem, “America”. The commercial is filmed in black and white and the many short clips and scenes promote a sense of a building of a new America. Fireworks are shown indicating a celebration and patriotic view of the sky, a woman riding a subway staring out the window to a gloomy city day outdoors, run-down rural neighborhoods, police holding off a group of protesters trying to get into the car of a white man in a suit, presumably an executive businessman. We see workers at home after a long day of work, praying, black children running through long grass fields, while their elders sit on rocking chairs observing. A lone American flag is blowing in the wind above all buildings and houses framed by power lines. When the word ‘strong’ appears on the screen, a black man is shown shirtless but it is not clear what he is doing, for all we see is sparks, until the very end of the commercial when we realize he was the one actually setting off the fireworks. A man is shown jumping over a fence for when the word ‘ample’ is read aloud. It is nearly impossible to see what the signs on the fence say when the commercial runs straight through, but the two signs, one in Spanish and the other in English, say, “Danger. Do not enter. Unsafe beyond this Point”. Black children are riding horses

through the outskirts of the city; riding horses which can be seen as an American pastime. A shadow of black a man standing on top of a sign when 'law' is spoken, which could represent that he is above the law, which discriminates against blacks and then a black young man and a white young woman kissing when Whitman says the word 'love'. This clip shows the hope for change for the future since in Whitman's time, this was against the law. The sunken America sign is shown again, there are a couple gun shot noises and everything goes pitch black. The black man that resembled the word 'strong' from earlier is actually seen holding the fireworks and running with two more young adults away from the screen holding a 'Go Forth' banner, the Levi's logo is shown and the commercial ends.

In the past 60 second commercial, there was a lot of information and interpretation to be made, so the next part of the essay will deal with the semiotic analysis of this commercial.

### **Semiotic Analysis of 'America'**

The central purpose of this commercial is not only to sell jeans, but also primarily to show the progress of building a new America and the concept (sign) of how patriotism does not die. From the moment viewers see an 'America' sign submerged in water, we can see that this is a different kind of commercial than what we are used to. After recent tragedies, the connection becomes very clear between the sunken America sign and the floodwaters of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Most of this commercial was filmed in the hurricane stricken parts of New Orleans, which intensifies the meaning of the commercial.

To begin, one of the signifiers of this ad is of the flooded 'America' sign. This signifies the hardships and economic depression that has become of our country. However, when Walt Whitman's "America" poem starts playing, a different emotion and spirit is brought upon the viewer. Walt Whitman represented optimism and change for America, while also standing for the power for real people. Ed Folsom, co-director of the Walt Whitman Archive said, "Walt Whitman's best writing always sought ways to face the adversity, bad times, and suffering around him and to find hope in the future." The mere opening seconds of this commercial show the forward-looking presence that Walt Whitman's words will exemplify.

Other signifiers shown are of the startling cracks of the fireworks. Fireworks in America are associated with the Fourth of July. That holiday can be looked at as a ritual. Fireworks typically are a symbol of celebration; a celebration that the United States won the war to gain independence. The fireworks shown in this advertisement are indicating that there is still a sense of fighting and hope in the American citizens.

The images seen of a woman riding a subway staring out into the gloomy city and run down neighborhoods seem too real. As viewers, we are reminded of the poverty and financial problems that many cities and citizens face every day. The repeated images of a white man in a business suit indicate the only kempt character in the advertisement. He is either in a chauffeured car trying to get through a group of angry citizens trying to mob his car or sitting in a skyscraper office looking worried and defeated. Cary Fukunaga, the director of the commercial, had intended to reinforce CEO hatred; CEOs are not always living a good life.



A binary comes into play for a split second when an image of a young black child is running through the fields while Whitman declares “grown”, while the next shot is once again of the business man, but this time standing outside in a cloud of steam, seeming desperate, helpless and doomed, while the word “ungrown” is shown. This signifies the diversity that should be learned and appreciated. This oppositional relationship helps us understand the meaning behind Whitman’s words. We would not know what “grown” and the future stands for without it’s opposite, “ungrown”. As Berger says, “it is not content that determines meaning, but relations in some kind of a system”. An American flag signifies patriotism. According to Peirce, a flag is a symbol that someone must learn, it is not something that we innately know. The flag is shown blowing in the wind above the city, surrounded by power lines. It almost seems as if the power lines, which can be harmful if touched, are guarding the flag. However, in the scenes following, there are once again images of fireworks reminding that hope and patriotism is still present; nobody or thing can take power over our National flag. Also, this scene especially reminds me of a picture I saw after 9/11; in the middle of all the rubble from the buildings, there was an American flag which was seen as such a powerful and moving image. In the ‘Go Forth’ commercial, the American flag signifies just that, the optimism and sense of positive movement that will come over time.

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**Figure 6. American Flag Behind Power Lines. Levi's Go Forth.**

Another signifier that I was almost surprised *hearing* was gunshot noises. Gunshots usually signify wounds or hurting. In this commercial, it's like the gunshots actually signify the poverty and disaster dying, and the 'going forth' beginning.

The multiple signifiers, combined with the signified, moving forth, optimism and hope and creates the sign of patriotism. Every viewer needs to believe that he or she is the American pioneer. A pioneer has individual rights and is free. Always look forward to new opportunities and never look back. If there are hard times, economically or from natural disasters, you, as an individual, will find the good and help those around you. On a mythic level, second level order expresses patriotism. Patriotism, the form, is the first term in the mythic formula. The ability to be a pioneer and have strong individual rights

is the concept. While the signification is America's youth will not be broken. For example, throughout the entire commercial, there are children running through streets and fields. On an ordinary glimpse, a viewer would not think that this commercial was aimed towards America's youth. However, after uncovering the pioneering spirit as well as the signifiers throughout the commercial, it is important to realize that no matter what tough times are ahead, each generation will have a stronger sense of pride, be more patriotic and enduring. The connection between the country and America's youth will never be corrupted.

This commercial is different than any other Levi's advertisement before. There are no models all made up with hair and make up, beautiful scenery, or even clean clothes. Commercials in the past express racy half-naked men and women who are all being intimate with each other. Celebrities such as Brad Pitt have been in the commercials at one point or another. The Go Forth campaign did not want celebrities. The creators wanted to embody what New Orleans looked like after the disaster. The signifiers shown are the people barefoot, shirtless, sweaty and their clothes reflect that; their jeans look dirty and worn in. This signifies hard working people that work for what they have in life in their Levi jeans.

The Go Forth campaign has expanded to include cities such as Braddock, PA, a former hub on America's industrialization. The Go Forth campaign is in the media for a good reason, to show patriotism, hope and the importance of America's youth.

## Conclusion

“‘Go Forth’ is more than a campaign; it is a north star for the brand. The campaign takes the raw, tough, and eternally optimistic spirit that made the Levi’s brand good and brings it to life as a clarion call for this generation,” said Doug Sweeny, vice president of Levi’s marketing. This is a very strong and powerful campaign that Levi’s brand jeans should be more recognized for. Not only is the campaign trying to sell their jeans, but they are selling the news as well. Viewers get an inside glimpse of how people of different race, ethnicity and financial level are living, in just a short 60 seconds.

The commercial leaves viewers with an important message, times have been tough, from the Walt Whitman days to the depression to Hurricane Katrina, we’ve been through them before and survived and became more united and patriotic. The Go Forth campaign has been successful because Americans want to buy, wear and support the nation. By showing advertisements and commercials with Walt Whitman’s stirring voice, it hits a different pathos level than a Brad Pitt commercial would. The advertisers are saying that by wearing Levi’s jeans, the pioneering spirit will be brought out and America will be whole once again. To conclude, nothing can break America’s youth. Nothing can hold us back; go forth with the new plan.

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## Appendix A

### Print Advertisements for the Campaign

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**Figure 7. Corresponds with "Ungrown" business man.**

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**Figure 8. Always Go Forth. Never Look Back.**